



An emotion based approach to assessing entrepreneurial education



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates links between emotional events and developed entrepreneurial competencies in an action-based entrepreneurship education program where students create real-life ventures. It represents a novel approach to assessing entrepreneurial education. A longitudinal design was applied following three engineering students during nine intensive months. Students were equipped with a mobile smartphone app used to report emotional events and critical learning events. Reports were followed up quarterly with semi-structured interviews. Links were identified through data analysis software NVIVO.

Findings indicate a large number of links between emotional events and developed entrepreneurial competencies. Three kinds of emotional events strongly linked to developed entrepreneurial competencies were interaction with outside world, uncertainty and ambiguity and team-work experience. These emotional events were linked to formation of entrepreneurial identity, increased self-efficacy, increased uncertainty and ambiguity tolerance and increased self-insight. These links represent early empirical evidence for three effective design principles of entrepreneurial education, and can also be used as indirect measures in assessment. This study also confirms venture creation programs as a suitable environment for studying entrepreneurship as experience.

Limitations of this study include a small number of interviewees, unknown transferability of results to other contexts, and risk for individual bias in data coding.

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1. Introduction

There is no shortage in the domain of entrepreneurship and enterprise education (i.e. entrepreneurial education, see [Erkkilä, 2000](#)) of prescriptive literature advocating for action-based and experiential approaches to developing entrepreneurial competencies (See for example [Gibb, 2008](#); [Heinonen & Hytti, 2010](#); [Mwasalwiba, 2010](#); [Neck & Greene, 2011](#); [Pittaway & Thorpe, 2012](#)). A group oriented, project based, hands-on and context laden approach with facilitated reflection is often recommended. Fewer articles empirically account for when, how and why such learning environments contribute to the development of entrepreneurial competencies. This is essentially an assessment challenge that remains largely unsolved in the domain of entrepreneurial education.

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Psychologists often divide the human mind into three parts; thoughts, actions and emotions (Hilgard, 1980). The assessment of entrepreneurship and enterprise education has hitherto relied primarily on two of these three parts, i.e. on thoughts or on actions, largely neglecting emotions as a potential indicator variable. Scholars have investigated students' *thoughts* by probing for perceived willingness and ability to act entrepreneurially before and after an educational intervention, leaning primarily on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Krueger & Carsrud, 1993). Former students' entrepreneurial *actions* have been probed for by investigating the prevalence of actual entrepreneurial behavior, such as business plan writing, venture start-up and venture success among alumni (Martin, McNally, & Kay, 2013). Both of these approaches to assessing entrepreneurial education have important shortcomings, leading to the evidence base of entrepreneurial education outcomes being rather inconclusive to date (Bae, Qian, Miao, & Fiet, 2014; Lautenschläger & Haase, 2011; Martin et al., 2013).

The thought based assessment strategy is indeed easy to apply, but only tells us if entrepreneurial competencies have been developed or not, and does not answer crucial questions such as how, when and why entrepreneurial competencies are developed through educational interventions. Another problem is the unreliability of students' perceptions due to their naïve views of work life in general and entrepreneurship in particular, especially before the entrepreneurial education intervention studied (Cox, Mueller, & Moss, 2002; Liñán, Rodríguez-Cohard, & Guzmán, 2011).

The action based assessment strategy can reliably identify entrepreneurial behavior. The difficulty here is to prove that it is entrepreneurial education that has caused successful entrepreneurial behavior. Venture creation takes many years to reach financial success, making it difficult to isolate the role of entrepreneurial education (Fayolle, Gailly, & Lassas-Clerc, 2006). Self-selection bias aggravates this problem, making it difficult to rule out the possibility that already entrepreneurial people are attracted to entrepreneurial education, causing these higher levels of entrepreneurial activity (Bager, 2011).

An explicit emotion based assessment strategy has not previously been tried in the domain of entrepreneurial education, but is the aim of this study. Studies empirically examining the role of emotions in entrepreneurial education are very scarce in general. One of the very few studies so far was performed by Pittaway and Cope (2007), and emphasized the role of emotional and risk-laden events and processes where students resolve uncertain, complex and ambiguous situations in authentic settings. They concluded that emotional exposure plays a major role in how students learn to become entrepreneurial. A few quantitative studies have also included emotional aspects as a minor part of their study design and/or outcome (Lepoutre, Van, Wouter, & Olivier, 2010; Rosendahl Huber, Sloof, Van Praag, 2012; Souitaris, Zerbini, & Al-Laham, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the impact action-based entrepreneurial education can have on students' development of entrepreneurial competencies. It is a longitudinal and in-depth exploratory and primarily qualitative study following three master level students during nine intensive months, exploring what emotionally laden experiences can be linked to entrepreneurial competency development. This linkage attempt represents a new approach to the assessment challenges in entrepreneurial education. It could spur development of new test items for use in future quantitative impact studies, and could also open up new methodological avenues for future impact studies. The study asks the question: How are emotional events linked to development of entrepreneurial competencies in an action-based entrepreneurial education program?

The article proceeds as follows. Relevant literature within general and entrepreneurial learning, emotions in entrepreneurial education and assessment of entrepreneurial competencies is explored. Then the mixed methods study design, empirical setting and underlying methodological assumptions are described, followed by the resulting data. This is then discussed and analyzed, followed by implications for practitioners and scholars.

2. Review of literature

A framework that has been instrumental in the design of this study consists of the three categories of the human mind; thoughts, emotions and actions. A philosophical underpinning has been identified as the tripartite division of mind (Hilgard, 1980), stipulating that "the study of mind could be divided into three parts: cognition, affection, and conation" (Hilgard, 1980, p. 107); or thoughts, emotions and actions respectively (see for example Jarvis, 2006); or knowledge, attitudes and skills respectively (see for example Fisher, Graham, & Compeau, 2008; Kraiger, Ford, & Salas, 1993). Such a tripartite framework has been frequently applied in the scarce previous work on emotions in entrepreneurial education when treating experience, learning and competencies (See for example Gibb, 2002; Gondim & Mutti, 2011; Kyrö, 2008; Oganisjana & Koke, 2012; Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011). The main benefit for this study of such a framework is that it puts a more equal emphasis on the three faculties of the human mind. This allows for exploration of emotional aspects without neglecting cognition and conation. In today's rationalist biased society focusing primarily on cognition (Lutz & White, 1986; Postle, 1993; Yorks & Kasl, 2002), such a framework can be valuable. The framework is related to in Sections 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3 and 5 below.

2.1. Emotional learning events

This study draws on work by entrepreneurship scholar Jason Cope, who has developed a comprehensive framework for entrepreneurial learning (Pittaway & Thorpe, 2012). Cope has pioneered research on discontinuous and emotional learning "events" in the field of entrepreneurial learning, and states (2003) that they have "a prominent role to play in how entrepreneurs learn" (Cope, 2003, p.436). Cope (2005) states however that "the entrepreneurship discipline does not currently possess sufficient conceptual frameworks to explain how entrepreneurs learn" (Cope, 2005, p.373). According to Cope, we

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